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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a summary of four research projects implemented by teachers who are graduate students and underlines paradoxes faced by each on how to grapple with the difficulty of reconciling the top-down change approach that their university program trains them in with the bottom-up approach called action research. The tensions created by the paradoxes experienced generate important questions dealing with the teaching of action/collaborative research in a university context. Questions advanced in the paper include: (1) What is the teacher researcher goal: to change himself/herself or to change the environment? (2) How are change agents trained through research? (3) How does one account for collaborative work done in the school setting when it is time to grant a degree; (4) Who plans the research and designs it with the student-teacher-researcher when it is collaborative: the university research committee or the action research team? (5) Is there a more appropriate research methodology when working with teachers as graduate students; (6) What type of research is more appropriate for teachers who want to become change agents, and can research be a change strategy? (7) Do teachers have to go to university to learn action research or can it be done in school settings? (Author/JB)

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Problems Emerging from the Practicing of Action Research in Graduate Programs in Education

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by

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ABSTRACT

This communication presents a summary of four researches implemented by the students, three of them practicing teachers. It will underline paradoxes faced by each of them who had to deal with the difficulty of reconciliating the top-down change approach, the university program put them through, with the bottom-up one called by the litterature on action research. The tensions created by the experienced paradoxes generated important questions dealing with the teaching of action/collaborative research in an university context. The authors will put forward the questions that emerged through this experience: What is the teacher-researcher goal: to change himself/herself or to change the environment? How do we train change agents through research? How do we account for collaborative action in school in a university context when it is time to grant a degree? Who plans the research and designs it with the student-teacher-researcher when it is collaborative: the university research committee or the action research team? Is there a more appropriate research methodology when working with teachers as graduate students? What type of research is more appropriate for teachers who want to become change agents and can research be a change strategy? Do teachers have to go to university to learn it or can it be done in schools settings? The participants will then be invited to share their thoughts with the authors.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional development has frequently been associated with the increase of school change capacity as a consequence (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) define professional development as,

> the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one's career from preservice teacher education to retirement. The impact of professional development depends on a combination of motivation and opportunity to learn. (p. 326).

Rudduck (1991) asserts that the function of professional development is to maintain, in the teacher, the capacity "to remain curious about the classroom". She defines four perspectives from which professional development can be described (Rudduck, 1992). The first one

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occurs through high degree programs offered by university at the master and doctoral levels. It is a more traditional format which has given mixed results depending upon the existing ties between the universities offering it and their communities. The closest the university from the milieu the more chances that the learning activities will take into account practionners'needs and aim for pertinence. The second sees professional development as being organized around curriculum development projects where, as Rudduck asserts, the teacher-as-researcher movement helped people to develop a more critical perspective and taught them to see the proposed curriculum as a working hypothesis rather than as a neat and finite ensemble. The third perspective is embodied in the school-based curriculum development movement. Rudduck maintains that it is a time consuming approach, uneasily lived through because she says it is difficult to get out of established patterns of thinking and perceptions. The fourth one is practionner research when teachers initiate and participate in an action research.

Richardson (1994) has also stressed the interest for teachers to become involved in research on their practice. Research on practice becomes a good instrument for practitionners to develop a highly reflexive stance upon their actions, leading to diagnosis of problems, the application of tentative solutions and reflexions upon the improvement of their own educational practice. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher research as being a "systematic, intentional inquiry about teaching, learning and school carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom setting." (p.27)

PURPOSE OF THE COMMUNICATION

The authors have been doing professional development for the last 10 years by teaching teachers to reflect upon their practice and by helping them to conduct a research or a practicum project which has to be related to the involved teachers' felt professional problems. Such an activity is part of their master's or doctoral degree programs in education,"a high degree program" type of professional development according to Rudduck's terms. Teachers can choose either to conduct a research or to develop a practicum project through which they will master new skills. Those who elect to do research are exposed to diverse research methodology approaches. Some of them become interested in doing action research in their own school environment.

In electing to do action research in partial fulfilment of their Masters' and Ph.D. studies, student researcher teachers face constraints and make important insights regarding the dynamics of change, towards their own professional attitudes and their intervention range

capacity. The authors also hypothesize that the academic framework within which student researcher teachers conduct their research project impose further strains upon them because two opposite logics face one another.

Our communication describes the problems student researcher teachers go through in trying to conduct action research in their schools in conformity with academic rules and program requirements regarding the planning and the conduct of a research project. The descriptions of four students'experiences in doing action research (three of the persons being practicing teachers) as part of their Masters' degree requirements provide the basis for further synthesis, reflexions and questionning.

While the teachers were conducting their action researches, a support group was organized by the authors. The four students and the authors met four times during a four-month interval (1993-1994) in order to exchange and discuss the problems they encountered. The group rejoined once again, one year after (1995), to reflect upon the whole experience of doing action research. Three of the four persons have already completed their Master's degree program and the fourth one is writing up her thesis.

SYNTHESIS, REFLEXIONS AND QUESTIONNING:

The discussions with the student researcher teachers led the authors to propose the following synthesis[1]:

√ The logic of action built into the process of action research is incompatible with the linear, systematic planning of research done within academic Master's degree programs. Research seminars done before the start of the reasearch project negates the collegiality and participation dimensions build into the process of doing action research. How can co-researchers influence research orientation if it has to be defined beforehand? Who "owns" the research: student researcher teachers, its collaborators, both? How can the university appreciates possible answers to such a question when granting a university degree?

√ Such a tension created by the need to a rigorously pre-planned research according to traditional academic standards and the dynamic of reality while conducting the research puts the person in a tug-of-war position. The researcher is then tempted to resist the milieu's attempts to change the research orientation or its timetable or shifts in its ownership because the student researcher teacher is the only one to be accountable for its research from the

[1] Two of the four students have read our French-written paper that was presented at a conference regrouping professors and students involved in our State Ph.D. program, August 1994. This paper described at much greater lenghts our discussions with the students and arguments supporting our synthesis, reflexions and questionning. The two student researcher teachers felt their experiences were adequatly represented in the paper and that it was a credible account of the occuring dynamics. The two other persons got the paper later. They have still to read it and to comment upon it.

university point of view. The person has obvious vested interests in conducting the research the way it was planned and approved by her university research committee.

√ Academic program imposes a sequence of activities before the research project can start. It takes the form of research seminar, research project evaluation, approbation of the final draft. The milieu however obeys to other forms of pressures (colleagues, administration, parents) and timetable (beginning of school year, holidays, exam periods, sudden availability of financial resources which have to be spent within few months, deadline for budget allocation). Time synchronisation between the 2 types of agendas is difficult to match. Can the student researcher teacher tell her own milieu to wait a little more before starting a project because her research project has yet to be approved by her committee?

√ Collaborators to the research tend to give full responsability of the action research process to the student researcher teacher because "after all, she will get the Master's degree". They resist to embark fully and in some case even resent the fact that they are part of their colleague's Masters' degree.

√ Action research is a great way to learn about dynamics built into the process of change in an educational setting. The student researcher teachers have learned that one can start with the desire to change others' practices but the person discovers, soon after, that the researcher ends up by changing herself. It provides a great opportunity to become more conscious about one's strenghts and weaknesses.

Such elements of synthesis coming from the many learnings done by our student researcher teachers led us, professors, to propose the following reflexions and questions.

The conduct of action research within academic programs is certainly an important tool for professional development but it is strained with paradoxes providing opportunities to learn from those experiences as well as to improve our own practice of helping teachers conduct action research in their school environment.

A first reflexion deals with the theoretical preparation our students receive before engaging in an action research. They are well-equipped from a methodological point of view. They are exposed to many research models, can take a critical stance upon them from a theoretical point of view. However, when they start conducting their action research project, such a theoretical background reveals itself to be incomplete because as the students said, other qualities and types of knowledge are necessary: leadership qualities, listener qualities, openness to other ideas. The know-how has to match with appropriate qualities and attitudes. One can assert that such observation is true for any kind of professional activity. However one has to remember that action research demands a complete involvement and at the same time a great openness from the researcher and a great tolerance to uncertainty. But how difficult it must be when your own Master's degree is at stake! What can one do when potential research collaborators do not share one's reading of the problem situation? What can

one do when a group of colleagues, at first interested, but later starts to pull back. The researcher finds herself isolated, forcing to reorganize rapidly her plans in the midst of the actual conduct of the research?

A second reflexion deals with the structure of academic programs. We believe that action research is a good and rich tool for teacher professional development. But the structures of our academic programs are incoherent with such a type of research. They negate the basic principles of action research: participation of the milieu, collegiality, shared ownership of the research. Students are allowed to conduct action research within academic programs but at the same time the imposed rules do not facilitate such an engagement. Action research projects are treated according to the same rules and standards more traditional research approaches function with: precise, beforehand problem definition, stated research objectives/hypothesis, explicit research methodology in which data collection and data analysis are described, steps often redefined in an actual conduct of action research.

A third reflexion centers around the emerging portrait of the action researcher as being a change agent in her own school environment. Interestingly enough, this aspect is not addressed per se as if this new role should fit naturally and instinctively. Teachers doing action research should be introduced to the process and dynamics of change. They should familiarize themselves with the concepts of change agent, change strategies. Action researchers should learn to portrait themselves as change agents in their environment thus restating the process and developping new understanding regarding their action research experiences being a change occurence in their milieu.

In an interesting article Atkinson (1994) describes the tensions a teacher goes through when engaging in a research experience. She compares ways teachers and researchers think. In the midst of action research, our teacher is portrayed as being in an even more difficult position because sitting "between the quick intuitive judgements of the teacher and the more rational and explicit analysis of the researcher" p. 398. Our students started with the desire to change others'pratice as mentioned before. In attempting to do so, they realized that their power of influence was very limited. But they also realized that changing oneself's practice was a great challenge. It empowers the person, gives confidence and increases the spectrum of interpersonal abilities with colleagues and parents as well as stimulates the desire to pursue the exploration of one's own practice. Our students solved, to their advantage, the tensions described by Atkinson as they increased "their professional wisdom" by getting a more

realistic reading of their environment which is seen now as being out of their control but within their reach because they relate to it and know which strenghts they can contribute to.

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